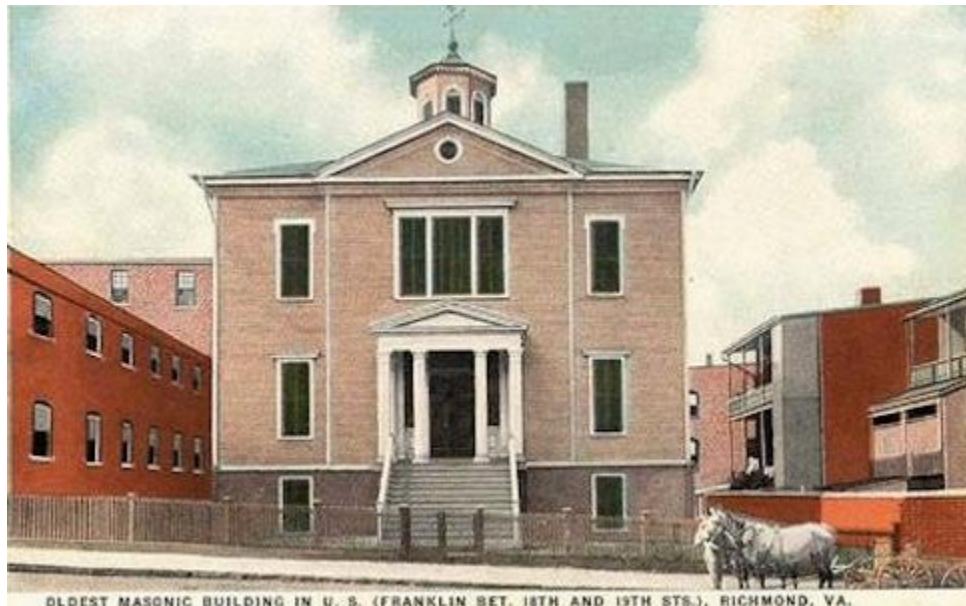


Masons' Hall

L. Douglas Delano

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

March 23, 1985



Most of the information in this brief paper was taken from an article written by Rt. Wor. Floyd W. Sydnor, a member of this Lodge at the time of his death, and published in several issues of the Masonic Herald in 1976. Brother Sydnor was an accomplished historian and went into much more detail than I plan to do. His article was titled THE ROMANTIC STORY OF MASONS' HALL and the length made it necessary to divide it into several issues of the Herald. I wish that I had the ability to add the touch of romance that the story deserves, for it is indeed a romantic story.

The City of Richmond was a young and small town when its first Lodge, Richmond Lodge No. 13, was chartered, on December 28, 1780, by the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Virginia at the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg with Grand Master John Blair presiding.

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Richmond Lodge No. 13 became Richmond Lodge No. 10 on the 28th of October, 1786, at a meeting of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, held in Richmond. Richmond became the Capitol of Virginia in 1779, owing to the Revolutionary War, and later the Capitol of the Confederate States of America which held its Congressional Sessions here from July 20, 1861 to March 18, 1865.

According to the census, for the year 1782, the town of Richmond had a population of 563 whites and 499 slaves and free negroes, or a total of 1,062. Of the whites, 171 were men 21 years of age or older. There were only two men and four ladies more than sixty eight years of age. The town extended from the present Nicholson Street in Fulton, West along the James River to First Street and North from the River to Broad Street, thence East, with slight variations. It was a small but thriving community and by the year 1800, including blacks, the population had reached 5,300.

It is rather remarkable, with such a small number of men from which to draw, that a second Lodge was chartered in Richmond on October 29, 1787, as Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19. St. John's Lodge was chartered November 2, 1792 and in Manchester, across the James River, Manchester Lodge No. 14 was chartered November 20, 1786.

The first Capitol in Richmond was located at 14th and Cary Streets, a mere wooden barn. On August 18, 1785, Richmond Lodge laid the Foundation Stone for the beautiful Grecian Temple, our State Capitol, on the hill. Among those present were the Officers of the Lodge; John Marshall and 48 other Brethren.

August 12, 1785, Gabriel Galt, sold Lodge No. 13, "All that certain piece, or parcel of land, lying and being in the City of Richmond, fronting on the South line of Franklin Street between 18th and 19th Streets, being a part of Lot 43, in the Plan of said City."

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The building was commenced and the Lodge was convened by the Master, on October 12, 1785, for the purpose of laying the "Foundation of the New Lodge", the Honorable James Mercer, Grand Master, presiding. It is clearly shown that the Cornerstone of the Hall was laid by the Lodge itself, and not by the Grand Lodge. The only member of the Grand Lodge present was the Grand Master himself.

The Lodge encountered considerable difficulty in raising funds to construct the building and applied to the General Assembly by petition, for the privilege of raising a sum, not exceeding fifteen hundred pounds by lottery, in addition to their own funds and subscriptions. The request was granted on November 22, 1785. At a meeting of the Common Hall of the City of Richmond at the Court House on the 2nd of January, 1786, by appointment of the Mayor -- present and members of the Common Council -- ordered that a Committee of five, consisting of Mr. Recorder (John Marshall), Mr. Galt, Mr. Webb, Mr. Lambert and Mr. Berkley by appointment to form a scheme of a lottery, agreeable to an Act of the present General Assembly, passed the 27th of December 1785, for the purpose of raising a sum of money not exceeding 1500 pounds. January 9th, 1786, "It is ordered, that Mr. Buchanan, Mr. Southall, Mr. Lambert, Mr. Edmund Randolph, Mr. Galt, Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Webb be appointed Managers of the same". You will note that one of the Managers was the then Governor of Virginia.

William Booker was the contractor for the building. The lower floor is built of brick with walls two feet thick, and it was the original design to erect a building of that material, but after some difficulty with the lottery, the remaining stories were constructed of wood, and the Hall, as it now stands was completed. Now the members of the Lodge were sorely perplexed as to how the money should be raised to pay the debt incurred. The lottery was a failure.

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But there were some members of the Lodge who had determined the enterprise should succeed. John Marshall came to the front to awaken enthusiasm and restore harmony. On the 29th of October, 1787, Richmond Randolph Lodge was chartered, with William Waddill as Master, John Dixon, Senior Warden and David Lambert, Junior Warden.

The members of the two Lodges then went earnestly to work. The remainder of the tickets were sold, and the drawing took place in the Hall on June 10, 1788, when over 400 pounds was realized. This served to satisfy the clamor of the workmen for a time, but there was still the sum of 625 pounds still due. It was decided that No. 10 would be responsible for two thirds of this amount No. 19 the other third.

The difficulty of raising money at this time is easily accounted for when we remember that on January 9th, 1787, a most disastrous fire had destroyed between thirty and forty houses in Richmond, and swept away property of the value of more than 130,000 pounds. The Hall was completed and the Lodges were receiving numerous petitions for membership. Among them were many of the most influential citizens of Richmond. The debt which had embarrassed them was greatly reduced and several years of prosperity followed.

The Grand Lodge, A.F. & A.M., of Virginia was held in Masons' Hall in the City of Richmond by order of the Most Worshipful Grand Master on the 27th day of October, 1786, Edmund Randolph Esq., Deputy Grand Master, presiding as Grand Master, Pro-Tem. At this meeting he was elected and installed Grand Master of Masons in Virginia. It was at this Grand Lodge that Richmond Lodge No. 13, was assigned the new number, No. 10. John Marshall was appointed Deputy Grand Master.

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At the time of its erection, Masons' Hall was the only building East of Shockoe Creek, with the exception of the Court House, in which public meetings could be held. The ground floor was in frequent use as a place of amusement, for public and political meetings, for religious meetings and a school of dance. Grand Balls were held here on the Fourth of July and also on the Anniversary of the birth of the Illustrious George Washington.

Richmond Lodge No. 13 was the first to meet in the building, soon to be joined by Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19, and in March, 1792, Richmond Royal Arch Chapter, now No. 3, was instituted. The latter two have made Masons' Hall their home for almost two hundred years and remain here until this date. I will not elaborate on the architecture of its many beautiful features, as you can see for yourselves.

September 13, 1791, No. 10, and No. 19, agreed to appropriate 10 pounds each to purchase a chair for the use of the Grand Master and the Master of the two Lodges. October 29, 1791 the Grand Lodge ordered the Grand Treasurer to pay one-third of the expense of the chair, provided, the whole expense did not exceed 50 pounds. The chair was purchased in England, and is still in use today. Five years later No. 10 and No. 19 appropriated \$50.00 to purchase two chairs for the Wardens, and mending the tables and benches.

I could take a lot of time in writing of the many problems of finances and repairs. There seemed to be a constant demand for funds and Grand Lodge was approached on several occasions and apparently responded favorably. The Hall was converted into a hospital in 1814 and used as such for more than a year. In the meantime No. 10, and Grand Lodge met in another location and No. 19 did not meet for a brief period, nor did No. 3 Chapter. All Lodges and Grand Lodge began meeting in the Hall in 1815, except No. 19 and they began in 1816.

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On October 26th, 1824, General Lafayette, his son George Washington Lafayette and a Brother LaVassieur arrived in Richmond and several days of celebration were held. On the evening of October 30th, a called communication of No. 19 was held and the three distinguished brethren were made Honorary Members of Richmond Randolph No. 19.

General Lafayette died in Paris on May 20, 1834. Lodges No. 10, 14 and 19 convened to join the military and citizens for the purpose of paying the last tribute of respect to the memory of our deceased Worthy Brother, the Illustrious General Lafayette.

Lodges No. 10 and 19 on June 11, 1827 agreed to rent the Chapter two of the lower rooms of Masons' Hall at the rate of seventy-five dollars per annum, and certain other conditions set forth in the agreement. The Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Virginia met in the Hall for a number of years. Chief Justice and Past Grand Master, John Marshall died in Philadelphia on July 6th, 1835. The remains arrived in Richmond on July 9, and were laid to rest in Shockoe Cemetery with Masonic Honors, conducted by Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19. He was a member of Richmond Lodge No. 10, but for some reason Richmond Randolph No. 19, conducted the last tribute of respect.

During the next several years just about all the Lodges in Richmond met in the Hall. Lodge numbers 36, 51, 130, 53 and Lafayette Royal Arch Chapter, due to fires in their meeting place or the War. Richmond Commandery K. T. formed March 24, 1816, met in the Hall for an indefinite period of time. During the several years of the War, many called Communications were held in the Hall to pay the last tribute of respect to brethren who were killed in battle.

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After the raising of the United States Flag over the State Capitol, William Flegenheimer and Emanuel Semon, standing on a Richmond Street, were approached by Lieutenant Colonel Atherton Stevens, Jr., who desired to know the location of the Masonic Temple. Semon replied that he was the Tiler of the Lodge, and Grand Steward of the Grand Lodge of Virginia and directed him to the Temple. Lieutenant Colonel Stevens immediately posted guards at the Temple and the houses of a number of the Masons of the City, to prevent further destruction. Semon on April 20, 1865, addressed a letter to Putnam Lodge, East Cambridge, Mass., as a commendation for the practice of the Masonic virtues Brother Stevens had shown.

It is known that a number of Northern soldiers attended Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19 in Masons' Hall.

"One of them wore his sabre at his side. Before entering the Lodge, he divested himself of it and hung it in the cloak room. After the Lodge closed, he went away and forgot the sabre. It is still here in the Hall, a reminder of those dark days of civil strife".

I personally believe that the brotherly love exhibited here in this sacred shrine played a part in paving a way of peace in those troubled times. In March of 1869 a new Masonic building was erected at 3rd and Main Streets, known as St. Albans Hall.

The Grand Lodge moved from Masons' Hall and held its Grand Annual Communication at the new Temple on December 12th, 1870. Grand Lodge had met in Masons' Hall from the 28th of October, 1786 to the above date. "Some of the famous men this country has ever produced have sat within its walls and helped to make the fabric of the Grand Lodge of Virginia as we know it today; and its walls have echoed the voice of many who have

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held high places in the Council of the Nation". From its inner sanctuary have emanated the Charters of our older Lodges, for a period of 84 years. "Masons and profane alike have a respectful regard for this Ancient Landmark of honored and honorable institution".

On May 7, 1872 in Richmond Lodge No. 10 began discussion of moving from the Hall, but did not move until August 6, 1878. The sale was finally consummated about December 4, 1883. "Worshipful George L. Bidgood moved that the Trustees of No. 10 be authorized to close the transaction with the Trustees of No. 19, at the order by them of \$900.00 for their interest in the old Masonic Hall on Franklin Street, which was adopted".

Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19 and Richmond Royal Arch Chapter No. 3, instituted in March 1792, have met in Masons' Hall during their entire existence, and continue to meet here at this time. Today, 1985, the statement of Samuel Mordecai, written in 1860, is just as applicable as when he wrote it.

"The Masonic Hall deserves also to be mentioned among the Ancient and Honorable edifices. Its proportions are creditable to the architect, as its good preservation is to the Brethren".

Editor's Note: The March 1985 communication of Virginia Research Lodge was actually held in Masons' Hall, where this paper was delivered. In 2020, while this paper is being distributed to a much wider audience, Masons' Hall is now under renovation. For more information about this historic structure, and also to donate to this cause, please visit Masons' Hall 1785, a Charitable Foundation, at <http://masonshall1785.org>.